BOSTON PUBLIC LIBRARY
3 9999 08631 437 2

Shelf No
551.25

FOUNDED 1852

SIC UT PATRIBUS SIT DEUS NOBIS

BOSTONIA
CONDITA A.D.
1630.

CIVITATIS REGIMINE DONATA A.D. 1822.

BOSTON PUBLIC LIBRARY

GIVEN BY

G. F. Mills

Feb. 24, 1893.

Boston Eng. Co.

30

SERMON

*7551.25

AT THE REOPENING OF THE CHURCH OF THE DISCIPLES

SEPT. 30, 1888

BY

W. P. TILDEN

PRINTED BY THE CHURCH

BOSTON

GEO. H. ELLIS, 141 FRANKLIN STREET

1888

J. B. Millet

Oct. 24, 1873.

SERMON.

"And they said one to another, Did not our heart burn within us, while he talked with us by the way, and while he opened to us the scriptures?" — LUKE xxix. 32.

WHATEVER interpretation we may put on the recorded communications of Jesus with his disciples after his going away, they are full of profound significance. To reconcile them with each other may be difficult. But the very discrepancy only shows the transparent sincerity of the writers, each penning his own convictions, regardless of what others might write.

Just what his "showing of himself" to his disciples was, whether outward or inward, we may not fully know till we, too rise and learn more of the power of risen spirits to make their presence felt. But it is plain that, in some way, Jesus did make himself felt as a personal presence with his disciples after he had passed out of their sight. Somehow, they were made to feel that he was no longer in Joseph's new tomb. The angel of the higher life had rolled away the stone. Mary, who had heard him call her name so often in the home in Bethany, heard the same dear voice she knew so well call it again as she stood by the tomb. Others *saw* him, whether with the outward or inward vision, we are not told. Peter felt his risen presence in the Pentecostal experience, Paul in the light above the brightness of the sun, and ever after followed him, even unto death. Disciples walked and talked with him on their way to Emmaus; and, though he vanished as soon as known, they felt an inward glow, which led them to exclaim, "Did not our heart burn within us, while he talked with us by the way?"

It was largely under this invisible spiritual leadership that the foundations of the Christian Church were laid and its superstructure reared. No wonder Paul declared, with all the emphasis of sight and insight, "Things seen are temporal, things unseen are eternal."

What a wonderful foreshadowing we have here of some of our deepest human experiences! A dear friend dies. Our sun is darkened. We lay away the form in sorrow deeper than tears can tell. A sense of unutterable loss sweeps over us. We go to the grave to weep there, wondering if there be any power on earth or in heaven to roll away the stone, when, lo! as we look through our tears, we see it is rolled away already. An angel of hope sits upon it, saying, "Not here, but risen." And by and by, in the still hour of thought, we *feel* the presence we cannot see, and hear with the inward ear the familiar voice, and commune with the risen and glorified one in a way that sense knows not, though real to the spirit.

As a church, you have passed through this experience, and know what it is. Your well-beloved and deeply honored minister, teacher, friend, brother, after long and faithful service, has been called up higher. Nothing could be more beautiful than the serenity of his going, singing his own psalm of "Rest in the shadows" while waiting for the angel to come, speaking his last word to the dear people of his love from the pulpit, to which his failing steps scarcely supported him. Nothing could be more fitting and tender than the way you kept the Lent of his waning powers, meeting here as if he were with you,— as he was in spirit,— and reading one of the sermons you had heard from his own lips till the hour of ascension came, and your grief was voiced by those who, like yourselves, "knew him but to love him, and named him but to praise."

And now, for the first time after that sacred apotheosis, you meet, as the disciples of Jesus met after they knew he was not dead, but alive forevermore, to renew the work so dear to his

heart and yours,— a work that takes on new sacredness with the thought that he is with you still as a fellow-worker, though you see him not.

Whatever new ministries may have been opened to him in the other mansions of our Father,— and we cannot think of him but as a ministering spirit,— his ministry *here* has not ended. He still speaks in more ways than we can tell,— through the silent library of printed wisdom and quickening he has left, through the fond memories and affections that still hold him fast, and through these mysterious but real influences which at times make his presence felt so distinctly that you can understand what the disciples of Jesus meant when they said one to another, "Did not our heart burn within us, while he talked with us by the way, and opened to us the scriptures?"

I dare not presume to tell you what he says. Each must listen for himself and be his own interpreter. But I may, without presuming, consider with you some of the leading features of this church of his planting, the church he loved so well, the church to which he gave his ripest years, and then left it to you as his choicest legacy, to be nurtured by your care, sustained by your generous support, material and spiritual, enlarged by your Christian zeal, and made more and more effective in the blessed work of redeeming love.

You will pardon me, I know, if, as one who has known you from the beginning, and worked by your side for many years in profound sympathy, I speak somewhat in detail of the principles and aims of this church of your love and prayer, not to instruct those who knew it all by heart,— yes, emphatically by *heart*,— but simply to recall with you some of the leading characteristics of that church life it is your privilege to perpetuate and deepen.

Your name, "Church of the Disciples," has in it the charm of simplicity. It naturally suggests the base and object of your organization.

You are a church,—not a parish, not a congregation, not a society, merely. These are all good names, hallowed by noble work done by them and through them for the kingdom of God. But there is a better name for a company of Christian believers united for worship and work: it is church! It has a deeper meaning than the others, much as it has been abused. It implies not merely assembling together, but the object of assembling; not merely association, but the object of associating. *Church!* All its suggestions are religious. It implies worship. It stands for reverence, faith, hope, aspiration. You are not a lectureship, not a lyceum, not a debating society, good as these are: you are a church,—"Church of the Disciples," a church of learners. But learners of whom? of Socrates? of Confucius? of Buddha? of Plato? *Yes!* so far as they have anything truly divine to teach. Few men have studied the various religious beliefs of the world more carefully and appreciatingly than he who planted this Church of the Disciples. His "Ten Great Religions" bears witness to his search after truth in all religious directions, outside as well as inside the Christian belief. But the word "disciple" in your church name meant to him and means to you discipleship of Jesus. To be true disciples of him, you will be learners of all who have divine truth to communicate, of whatever name; for that is the genius and spirit of the teaching of Jesus. Real discipleship of him brings one into the attitude of discipleship to all the sons of God. But you put him first simply because to you he is first,—because he stands above all others you know, as a representative son of God, because he lived the truth he taught, because he illustrated the true relation of man to God, because he rose to a clear conviction of what you dimly feel,—the indwelling Father,—because in his divine sonship you see fore-

shadowed the divine sonship of humanity, because, when you ascend the mount of vision with him, to you, also, the heavens are opened, and the spirit like a dove descends into your hearts, with the assurance, "This is my beloved Son."

Your discipleship of Jesus, therefore, stands not for narrowness or shallowness, but for breadth and depth as limitless as the truth and love of God. It is a discipleship that introduces the soul to God, and keeps the mind and heart forever opened upward, not only to truth already revealed, but to every fresh communication from God to the human soul. The disciple of Jesus looks not only back to him in reverent teachableness, but forward with him to his Father, and our Father, for continued guidance and inspiration. Like his Great Teacher, he must live in the felt presence of God, and welcome every new call of the spirit to a yet diviner life. The spirit of discipleship will not fancy it has attained or become already perfect, but, like the onlooking apostle of our liberal faith in the early Church, "forgetting the things that are behind, and reaching forth" to a still more perfect realization of the ever-living God, it will not rest content with things as they are unless they are right, but work for things as they should be, assured that what *shoula* be *will* be, if man works together with God.

The truly progressive must be a worshipping church. This you have fully appreciated from the beginning. The pains taken by your minister to prepare a ritual that should be broad, catholic, responsive, in which the people could join in *word* as well as spirit, indicates the prominence he gave to *worship* when the church was organized. At that time, few of our liberal churches had any ritual service. It was an innovation then. It is a common custom now, and increasing in favor. But, to escape monotony and furnish variety, you leave a large place for spontaneous prayer, and give to secret and solemn *silence* its voiceless communion with God, when each soul can come to the Father in its own way, to tell its own thanks and needs.

You have come to love this service. It has already hallowed associations with the risen ones who have joined in it with you here, and have gone where worship finds larger expression, but who look back, we may well believe, in grateful memory of many quiet Sunday hours they spent with you in prayer and praise, in sacred song, and in reverent thought of God and duty and the divine life.

Your church, then, like the Church Universal, stands for worship. So may it ever stand. Channing, just before he rose, printed a sermon entitled "The Worship of the Father a Service of Gratitude and Joy." It is, indeed; but it is more. It is inspiration to highest thinking and noblest living. It is the central shaft in the Christian tent. Every line of Christian duty is fastened to this central support of reverent worship. It keeps the Eternal before the mind. The thanksgivings, the prayers, the aspirations, the sacred songs of worship, often strike a deeper chord, and bring more comfort and peace than the sermon. And yet worship is sometimes called in disparagement "the *husk* of religion." Be it so. If we understand all the uses, protective and nutritive, of the *husk* to the growing grain, we may well accept the figure for its spiritual significance. Not till God in nature sees fit to ripen the naked grain without the living sheath of husk will we accept the idea, that seems growing in some quarters, that the noblest characters can be ripened under the hot sun of temptation and trial without the divinely formed husk of reverent worship.

Hold on to your worship, I need not say. You will hold on to it. But I may say, Love your service of worship, cherish it fondly, bring your hearts to it; and you will never, "as the manner of some is," be willing to miss it, caring only for the sermon, but will join in it for its own sake, as a divinely fitting preparation for the best things in the sermon, and as inspiration for the noblest work of life.

From the very beginning, you have had before you the ideal

of a *social* church, a home church, I might almost say a family church. Some of you still remember those sweet, early days, when each one knew every other personally, and your Sunday meetings were not unlike the meeting of a household around the home fireside. As the church grew in numbers, drawn mostly by interest in the preacher, this feature of the church naturally faded somewhat; but it was an original and *peculiar* feature when you began,—a blessed feature, the revival of which, as far as possible, will be sure to enhance your power in accomplishing the work of a Christian church.

One of the rich fruits of your efforts to make your church a religious home was the week-day evening service you held in the vestry for years. It always seemed to me the best meeting for social religious purposes I ever attended. The formality, monotony, and hortatory character of the usual prayer and conference meeting was set aside for simple, natural, religious conversation. Your minister would sit at his table, with as many as chose to come seated in chairs around him. A brief prayer, a sacred song, all uniting, a passage of Scripture, suggesting some interesting topic, a brief word upon it, and then, through leading questions, drawing out the thoughts of those present in the most familiar and unstudied way,—it was charming. It was "Friends in Council"; and, coming as it did halfway between the Sundays, it was a sort of golden clasp to unite them, making the Sunday past a quickening memory and the Sunday coming a fond anticipation. I don't know why they were given up; but, should they be revived in the new dispensation just opening to you, and should they be sustained with persistent interest, I fully believe they would be a means of grace, full of blessing.

Something of this kind is needed, I think, in all our churches as a week-day stimulus to religious thinking, and an encouragement to religious expression, on the part of those who, in the Sunday service, only listen.

Your Sunday-school and various missionary enterprises are gems in the crown of your rejoicing, that need continued resetting and burnishing anew. None but those engaged in the work know anything about that eternal vigilance necessary to keep a Sunday-school in repair and build it up in Christian nurture, keeping the ever changing ranks full and the interest alive.

Your superintendent, with his long and rich experience and his band of co-workers, know all about it. But they would like to have you who worship here know all about it too, that, when they make a draft upon you for the assistance they are sure to need, it will be honored by a prompt and cordial response.

In various philanthropic ministries, your church has an honorable record. From the days of the "contraband," whom as a church you were so prompt to aid in that dark hour just before the day of freedom broke, and who with their children and children's children still hold the name of him you love in profound reverence,—from those days, which now seem so long ago, up through war-struggles, emancipation glories and needs, and the more recent and ever increasing calls for the education of the ignorant, the restoration of the wandering, the homing of the orphan, and the like, you have made a record that will stand, not to foster pride, but to be a perpetual incentive to yet grander work.

In every great crisis in church life, like this through which you are now passing, there is always danger of a declining interest in the various ministries of the church, and so also a special call to renewed efforts to keep the coals on every separate altar bright and burning. To permit such an experience as yours to lessen your zeal and earnestness in any single branch of your church work would be to miss the providential opportunity and the providential call to rise into a service higher and nobler than you have yet achieved.

But I have not yet named the most distinguishing feature of

your church. In that bright vision of the Church of the Disciples its founder saw — a vision to which he gave his ripest years to realize, with your aid and the Divine help — there was one idea clearly defined, ever present, never forgotten, the idea of a *free church*,— free in the sense of free sittings for all. This was a marked innovation when your church was organized. Pew ownership was the almost universal usage. The proposition of free seats for a self-supporting church seemed absurd and impracticable. This did not turn your minister from his purpose. He had a singular felicity of faith that what was right must be practicable. Free church sittings being right to his thought, that settled the question and cast out fear. The outward distinctions of rich and poor brought into the church, and hung conspicuously on the pew door, were an offence to him. It pained him to see how the "gold ring and goodly apparel" method of seating, which met with such prompt and pointed rebuke in the early church, still held sway, crowding out the poor people in plain attire and small purse, making them feel that their presence, if tolerated, was not welcome. To sell seats or let seats in the house of prayer and praise seemed to him like making his Father's house a house of merchandise. A real church of "Christian disciples" he saw should recognize Christian brotherhood. It should write over its doors the grand old prophetic invitation, "Ho, every one that thirsteth, come ye to the waters, and he that hath no money; come ye, buy, and eat, . . . without money and without price."

He saw, of course, that no church could be sustained without money; but he had faith in men and women as well as in God and Christ, and fully believed that men and women, touched with the Christ spirit, working together for the kingdom of God, would be willing to give, not for themselves alone, but for others, not to secure a good seat for themselves merely, but to bid all whose feet were drawn to the house of prayer a cordial welcome.

And so well satisfied was he, and were you who wrought with him, after nearly thirty years of trial, that, when the time came for the erection of this church edifice, you gave your funds, and asked contributions of others, I remember, on the ground that it was to be held sacred forever as a free church.

Already, many ministers and laymen of various denominations are thinking and working in this direction. You have anticipated this increasing drift of thought, and have the satisfaction of knowing that, slowly as the churches are moving, it is in this direction. Many are longing for it who do not see their way clear to accomplish it. Their churches are organized on a different plan, it is not easy to change. Many of them are seeking earnestly to give everybody a welcome, and do all they can in the way of the largest hospitality, while hampered by ancient usage. Here you have a decided advantage over them all. You began right, and have only to continue with unfaltering steps the path you have trodden so long and well.

Of course, this way has its difficulties, as every ascending path has. None know them better than you. You have felt them. You have met and overcome them. As a church, you have lived triumphantly through them, and now stand on the threshold of a new era, with the courage of your convictions, born out of your confidence in the Eternal Right.

But this is only a part of your work. I have emphasized it because it is a glorious part,— a special distinction,— for which you intend to stand, with the free church flag, which has so long waved over you, nailed to the mast.

But, far above this and all questions of methods, you are a *church*,— a church of the living God ; and it is for the advancement of pure and undefiled religion in heart and life — for the upbuilding of the kingdom of God on earth — that you are united.

Brothers and sisters of the Church of the Disciples, God, in

the plenitude of his love, is holding out to you a glorious opportunity. You have behind you a singularly interesting and stimulating history. You have known, so far, but one minister. For forty-seven years, he has gone in and out before you with ever increasing love and reverence. Not this church only, but this city, the State, the nation, the world, has felt his influence. His sermons, his lectures, his speeches, his books, have gone all over the land and across the sea. His audience was never so large as since he rose. It is increasing still. This church is hallowed ground. As liberal Christians from abroad, reaching our city, inquire first for Channing's church, that they may worship for once in the place sacred to his quickening thought, so will pilgrims of our liberal faith from abroad inquire for the Church of the Disciples, that they may stand by the altar where James Freeman Clarke broke and distributed the bread of life. Yes: you have an honored and inspiring history, not only in your revered leader, but in the band of noble men and women who have worshipped and worked with you, many of whom passed over the river before him.

But your past, grand as it is, is a legacy that will bring you honor only as you reinvest all its gains of faithful service for God and man in yet more abundant efforts for human weal. The future must excel the past, or it will not equal it. And you can, you will, God and his Christ helping, sacred memories cheering, immortal hopes inspiring,—you can and you will carry forward to yet grander achievements the work committed to your trust.

And, as you worship here and in your homes in the still hour of silent thought that invites communion with the risen ones, you will sometimes feel *his mysterious presence*, and your hearts will burn within you as he talks with you by the way, and opens to you the sacred scriptures of daily experience,—the new, fresh word of God forever speaking to waiting souls.